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SUBJECT: ROME'S INTER-FAITH MEETING

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¶1. Summary: Rome's mayor Walter Veltroni hosted an inter-faith meeting on September 19 attended by Cardinal Paul Poupard, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue; Sami Salem, Imam of Rome's Grand Mosque; Abdallah Redouane, Secretary-General of Rome's Islamic Cultural Centre; Riccardo Di Segni, Rome's Chief Rabbi; Leone Paserman, President of Rome's Jewish community; and Andrea Riccardi, co-founder of the Community of Sant'Egidio. The meeting, which was originally planned to launch an interfaith magazine' did much to address recent tensions between the Christian and Muslim worlds. End Summary.

¶2. Cardinal Paul Poupard, President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, was the most anticipated speaker of the event. He began his address by acknowledging that is was a "difficult, very difficult moment," referring to the days following Pope Benedict's September 12 lecture in Germany which offended Muslims. Cardinal Poupard said that the Pope's recent 'clarification' on Sunday, September 17 was "sincere." He emphasized that the Pope has great respect for Islam and is firmly "engaged in dialogue with Islam." He explained that that dialogue is taking place in Rome, but also at the local church level in all countries. He concluded with, "It is difficult, but a dialogue of truth on the different traditions and religions is necessary. The Pope says it is necessary-to move forward with truth, and with great respect and self-critical dialogue."

¶3. Sitting on the other side of the podium from Cardinal Poupard was Sami Salem, Imam of Rome's Grand Mosque, and a recent arrival from Cairo. He opened his remarks with a greeting in Arabic and moved quickly to underline that he was sending a message of reconciliation to the

world by his presence at the meeting. "We are always ready for dialogue, for living together, and in the current moment, we have a great occasion to do this," he said. He explained that dialogue can not be simply a word, "but it should be a pact." He concluded by saying, "In this very, very difficult moment, it is necessary to develop dialogue, to come to know each other. ~We have to work to explain points of view of other religions." In light of Christian-Muslim relations, he recently offered to the media an unkind comparison of Benedict XVI to Pope John Paul II.

¶4. The speaker receiving the most robust applause from the packed hall was Secretary-General of Rome's Islamic Cultural Centre, Abdallah

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Redouane. He stated that the Koran calls for the three monotheistic faiths to dialogue, underlining that there is always a need for more professional dialogue and leaders. He said this approach is not a privilege, but a responsibility. "There needs to be participation in logic and willingness, between individuals and society. There is great tension today and the results have been monstrous." He went on to say that the Pope's words at the Sunday, September 17 Angelus had been "sincere" and he had "satisfaction." He said "Cardinal Poupart is here as a strong symbol from the Vatican for a future with confidence, a future with dialogue~dialogue on jihad, serene and with

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mutual respect." He finished with saying, "there aren't options; we die or we dialogue."

¶5. The meeting ended with a symbolic gesture as the participants left the dais for a lingering group handshake, much appreciated by the throng of media present, and seemingly the brainchild of media savvy Mayor Veltroni.

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